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death in the tall grass

The black buffalo had killed a man.
It was up to Game Warden Molloy
to find and execute the murderer

by Sandy Sanderson

Illustrated by Bruce Bonberger

Tion drama begins one broiling Sunday at Juba, just 4 degrees north of the Equator, in the southern Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Six naked men and one dressed in shorts went out to hunt. They crossed the White Nile in dugout canoes and, carrying spears, walked into the 8-foot elephant grass. They were looking for cane rats—vegetarians as big as a rabbit and tender-tasting in a cooking pot.

These six naked men were Latukos, tall, east-moving, tough men. They disliked clothes, which somehow seemed to mar the bright sheen of manhood. In their opinion a man who worked for the government as a clerk or a soldier had to wear clothes, true, but not on Sunday.

The seventh man was a young Bari tribesman whom the Italian mission fathers had named Pietro. From then he had received the idea that not to wear pants was to shame God. The Latukos laughed.

That Sunday the hunters did not find cane rats. They found a cape buffalo, possibly the most dangerous animal in Africa. The buffalo charged them. From 5 yards away a man named Mandir hurled a spear with all his might into the glistening black back. The beast turned on him.

Another man shouted and leaped in the air. The buffalo twisted and raged for him, and yet another man attracted his attention. The animal refused to charge again. He gazed at the hunters with calculating eyes. Then with a snort he trotted off into the tall grass.

That is what makes an African buffalo so dangerous. You can never tell what he will do.

At dawn the next morning Mandir and Pietro and Pietro's wife crossed the Nile again. They were looking for the vultures which would show that the 12-inch steel head of Mandir's spear had done its work in the side of the buffalo. A thousand pounds of meat is valuable in the straw-thatched native huts of Juba. But the cloudless early-morning sky gave no sign of death in the tall grass.

About 8 a.m., Mandir, who is an askari, or soldier, in the Sudan Defense Force, said, "I [Continued on page 94]

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Molloy pointed across the clearing. Buffalo
horns lay low in the grass. It was an ambush.



Death in the Tall Grass

Continued from page 11

must go home and put on my uniform and report for duty."

"I will stay and hunt for the buffalo," Pietro said.

"No, no!" wailed Pietro's wife.

"Shut up," said Pietro, and she did. Wives are accustomed to obedience in the Sudan. "The Latuko have laughed at the Bari long enough," Pietro explained. "They call us the Mission Bari..."

Four men follow a wounded cape buffalo into the tall grass, but in Africa it is every man's privilege. It is a very clear way to prove that you are a man. Mandir took Pietro's wife by the arm and returned to the river.

This was no Monday. Early Tuesday morning a Bari fishing in the Nile did see the vultures wheeling low over the long grass. He nosed his canoe into the reeds and went to see if there was not some meat of this dead game that could be saved.

He did not find edible meat. He found what was left of Pietro. Pietro's hands were here and his feet were over there and in between there was not much more than a stain on the earth. That, also, is what makes the African buffalo so dangerous. He is vindictive.

They shovelled Pietro into a small basket and buried him. About 3 p.m. Tuesday an African game scout came with Pietro's brother to the terrace of the house where Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Peter G. Molloy were having tea. Pietro's brother had a request. He wanted Molloy to shoot the buffalo murderer.

Molloy often gets requests like this. He is the game warden for the southern Sudan. His territory ranges 900 miles wide, from Ethiopia to French Equatorial Africa, and 400 miles up, north from the Kenya-Uganda-Congo frontiers.

Molloy answered, as he always does to such requests, that the next morning he would enter the long grass and shoot the wounded buffalo.

When the game scout and Pietro's brother had gone, Molloy made a face. "Bad business," he said to me. "Rather shoot a pair of elephants any time than a wounded buffalo in deep grass."

"Does he have to be shot?"

"He'll kill the first native that blunders onto him now—and go on killing until somebody gets him. A spear in the ribs is a bit irritating."

Molloy lifted the tea leaves out of his cup with a spoon and deposited them on the saucer. "The buffalo is the most dangerous game I know of," he said finally. "He can see you a half mile away, pick up your scent when you think there isn't any wind, and hear a reed snap at 200 yards."

Pete Molloy doesn't look 38. Neither does he look like a lieutenant colonel in the Somerset Light Infantry, which up to five years ago he was.

Back in England he found penicillin soldering conning and answered an ad in the *Times*. Some godforsaken district in central Africa wanted a game warden.

Pete was picked out of 110 applicants.

Nowadays he shoots twenty elephants a year himself, orders 500 more shot and issues permits for 250 others to be spared by tribesmen. This helps keep the Sudan's elephant herds at about 15,000, among the biggest in Africa.

In addition he shoots wounded buffalo in tall grass, when necessary.

"Too much work at the office tomorrow, but I can't very well send Loghere out alone," he said, half to me, half to his wife.

Loghere is the chief native game scout. Like all Africans he is proud of his skill and courage as a hunter.

P. G. Molloy, game warden, rose at 5 o'clock Wednesday morning. He had a cup of tea and cleaned his double-barreled Holland & Holland 500/465, the rifle with which he shoots elephants. He then ate a slice of papaya, four eggs, bacon, toast, marmalade.

His wife handed him a vacuum container full of tea and he went outside and got in his jeep-like, four-wheel-drive Land Rover. The head game scout, Loghere, and two other scouts were waiting.

We drove to a native village of round thatched-roof huts and asked the chief for a man named Mandir. Mandir came out of a nearby hut buttoning on the tunic of a private in the Sudan Defence Force. The Land Rover drove to the river and aboard the ferry. It is the only car ferry over the White Nile for 1,000 miles.

On the other side of the river there was a delay. The man who had found what was left of Pietro lived on the bank they'd just left. The game scouts shouted for him and he came across on the next ferry. Molloy was angry at the delay. The sun was well up and it was already getting hot.

The party drove two miles to another small collection of huts which could supply a few porters. Molloy got out and put his rifle together. He loaded the rifle with two 5-inch-long metal cartridges and put six more in the upper left pocket of his bush jacket. A small naked black boy watched him curiously. Then the safari headed single-file into the bush.

First came the native who had found Pietro. He would guide the party to the death scene. Next came a game scout who could talk to the native in his own language. The game scout carried a .404 rifle.

Mandir, who had no rifle of his own but was proven in courage, became Molloy's gunbearer. He carried the Holland & Holland on his shoulder, muzzle foremost. Molloy, behind him, could seize it in one step and fire.

Loghere and the other scout followed with their own .404's, and the porters and I, carrying my camera, after them. The party moved cautiously across country black under its feet. In the dry season the tribes burn the withered long grass so that fresh green sprouts will appear to feed their scrawny cattle.

But the tribes are careless. They do not burn all the grass. Even in the spots they burn there are tall reeds and bushes. The party can seldom see more than 15 yards in any direction.

There is a crashing sound. Molloy

seizes his rifle. Safeties click off. A magnificent waterbuck the size of a moose bounds into view. No one moves. The waterbuck stands elegantly poised and then leaps into cover. From the top of a 10-foot anthill, thirty does can be seen racing away. The buck had come to do battle with the intruders.

The safari moves on into the bush after a wounded African buffalo.

An hour later the native in the lead halts beside an anthill and says something in Bari. "Is this it?" Molloy asks the game scout in Arabic. "Yes," the scout answers in English.

The three of them find the spot where Pietro was surprised by the buffalo. The buffalo had been crouching by a native track. Pietro had scrambled to a large anthill. He got only halfway up when the buffalo hooked him into the air. He came down 10 feet away. There the buffalo trampled and gored the life out of him and minced and shredded his flesh.

There is a shove! mark where the natives picked him up. The only other sign: the white droppings of the vultures.

The party edges off quietly and upwind. Molloy frequently climbs anthills and searches the savanna with powerful glasses. Nothing can be seen.

Finally he halts the march. "We'll burn here," he tells the scouts in Arabic. The party gathers grass torches and several men move off in either direction. Loghere stands with Molloy. They wait to see if it will take.

Flames crackle and roar high, adding to the scorching heat of the sun. The fire burns well for a minute, moves a dozen feet and then dies down.

"Burned too soon ago," mutters Loghere. He looks at Molloy. Molloy waits for the fire, but it does not catch. The scouts are watching Molloy. Molloy turns to Loghere. "Do you know exactly where the water hole is in there?" he asks.

Loghere clicks off the safety of his rifle in answer.

Molloy pulls a small bag of wood ash from his pocket, shakes some out and watches which way the dust blows. He takes his rifle from the bearer.

Side by side, Molloy and Loghere enter the 8-foot reeds and half-burnt grass. They cannot see far. If there is a buffalo in there he cannot help hearing them. At every slow step a reed snaps.

They often stop to peer ahead. They can see nothing. The porters wait outside and among them the tension grows. Snap, snap, pause. Snap, snap, pause.

When Loghere and Molloy are well into the tall grass an excited whisper floats out: "Here he is!"

The two game scouts go in, as silently as they can in haste. They make too much noise. But that does not matter because certainly the buffalo already knows about his enemies. If he has not charged it is because, in his cunning, he plans to do something else.

The game scouts come up behind Molloy and Loghere bracing hard with excitement and holding their .404's ready. "There is the buffalo," Loghere tells them in Arabic, pointing at a dim black swatch of color among the yellow reeds some 30 yards away. All eyes strain to

make out the form of the buffalo. The black patch does not move.

"I don't like this," Molloy says. "We're all jammed up and we don't have a clear shot at him. If he charges here, the chances are he'll get one of us." He motions for everyone to inch back down the trail that has been made.

There is wonder on the faces of the porters as the four back cautiously out of the tall grass.

"Didn't you say there was a clear area around the water hole?" Molloy demands of Loghere.

Loghere nods gravely.

"We've got to get dist between us and the buffalo."

Molloy moves off briskly and 200 yards away edges into the tall grass again. Loghere and the scouts join him.

Many minutes later they come out on a small clearing, but they do not enter it. Silently they scrutinize the grass around it. The clearing is as Loghere said: 10 to 12 yards across. Finally Molloy points.

There are buffalo horns low to the grass.

They move a few feet. The buffalo is there, on the other side of the clearing. He is lying down now. He is lying just a few feet off the slight trail which they would have followed to come and get him. It is an ambush.

Molloy and Loghere can only see his head and part of his neck and back. The buffalo sees them. He watches carefully. He does not move. It is hard to tell what he is thinking. You can never tell what a

wounded buffalo is thinking. Or what he will do.

This is not a sporting expedition. This is an extermination party. Molloy and his chief game scout are here to kill a public menace. They raise their rifles.

"Neck shot," Molloy says.

That is because the hunters cannot see the vital heart area and the head is at a poor angle. The neck shot at the base of the spine will stun or paralyze the buffalo. Probably. The range is about 15 yards. The two rifles crack almost as one shot.

The buffalo does not charge. He is badly hurt. He tosses his head in spasms of great pain. He does not get to his feet.

Molloy and Loghere wait two minutes. The spasms ease, but the buffalo is still alive. The two hunters move cautiously in to about 12 yards.

"Brain shot," Molloy says.

The two rifles explode together again, and one bullet enters just behind the ear and the other just in front of it. The head of the buffalo makes one final jerk and drops. He looks dead.

Molloy reloads again and waits. One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. Four minutes. Five. He is undoubtedly thinking of the other times, of buffalo lunges at close range. When you kill for a living you don't take that kind of chance often. Not any more often than you have to.

"All right," Molloy says finally.

With Loghere at his side he moves

slowly in to 10 yards, 8, then 5. He pauses for an instant here. The two men search the buffalo for sign of movement. Is it worth-while putting another shot into him?

Apparently not.

They move in over the buffalo. They stand, waiting. Nothing happens. His head is slumped forward on the ground. Blood runs out of his nostrils. Molloy gives him a cautious kick. He prods him with his rifle barrel. Loghere grins and jumps on the beast's back. The buffalo is dead.

He is a big bull. Black and glossy. The party must make sure that this is the same buffalo which Mandir had wounded on Sunday. There is no spear wound in his side. Turn him over. Even in death you can see the power in him. He is heavy to turn over and everyone pushes and pulls.

"Here is my spear!" Mandir cries out, poking his finger into a festered wound in the bull's other side. He can feel the steel inside, the 12 inches of steel. Mandir smiles proudly.

Molloy looks at the boss of the horns, the great curved horns. A dark-red stain is upon the boss. "The old murderer," Molloy says. "Look at the dried blood." There even appears to be some human hair mixed with the dried blood.

The buffalo's tail is cut off with a spear. It is the property of the man who has killed the buffalo, and Molloy gives it to Loghere. Loghere receives it with dignity.—Sandy Sanderson